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A year of the ayatollah, and politics, and captivity

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The marble corridors and offices of the State Department were empty in the early morning hours of Nov. 4, 1979. Shortly before 3 a.m. the department's operations center, staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, began receiving frantic messages from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran.

The department had known that tens of thousands of Iranians would be marching in the streets of Tehran that Sunday morning. They were marking the first anniversary of the day when the deposed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's troops had fired upon protesting students at the University of Tehran. The bloodshed

had given new impetus to the revolution.

In Tehran, the marchers' route took them down Taleghani Avenue and past the U.S. Embassy compound at No. 260.

Armed Iranian guards stood outside watching impassively. Inside, seven of the embassy's 14 Marine guards were on duty. The others were in their living quarters across the street, some asleep, all unarmed. They were not allowed to take their weapons outside the compound.

As the marchers went by the embassy, a pack of between 500 and 1,000 broke off from the main body and ran past the passive revolutionary guards. They burst into the compound. Most of them wore badges

with the portrait of the country's spiritual — and at the time, its only effective political — leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

American officials retreated, barricading themselves in the embassy's main building where they tried to burn and shred documents. It was then that the operations room nearly 5,000 miles away in Washington began receiving the frantic messages.

Marine guards tossed a few tear gas canisters at the mob. But they were under orders not to shoot at the crowd. Within minutes they, along with the embassy staff, were overwhelmed, bound, blindfolded and taken prisoner.

The marines who had been off duty across the street from the 27-acre

compound also were captured, bound and brought to the ambassador's residence.

At the same time, six embassy employees working in a newly constructed consular building slipped out of a rear door. Once in the street, they scattered. Three months later, the six, after hiding out in diplomatic residences, escaped using forged documents identifying them as Canadian diplomats.

By 3:45 a.m. Philadelphia time, the militants controlled the whole embassy. They immediately strung a banner in the compound. It read: "Khomeini struggles. Carter Trembles."

Then they announced that they would hold the embassy, and their

hostages, until the United States returned the shah to Iran to stand trial. Ten days earlier, the Carter administration, against the advice of its own experts, had permitted the exiled shah to enter the United States for treatment of cancer of the lymph nodes.

In the holy city of Qom, a spokesman for Khomeini issued a brief statement that Sunday afternoon. The takeover, the spokesman said, had the personal support of the ayatollah.

Khomeini, the imam — holy man — who had led the revolution that toppled the shah's regime the preceding February, earlier had attacked the United States for admitting the shah. He had said he hoped the reports that the shah was dying of cancer proved true. In a broadcast, Khomeini had said:

"In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate, America, America, death to your plots! Our martyrs' blood is dripping from your claws! The United States is enemy number one of humanity and the Iranian people. Under the pretext that the deposed shah is ill, it has harbored him."

President Carter was at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, that weekend. By daybreak Sunday the State Department was setting up a special Iran task force. Carter was thoroughly briefed. He decided that he was not needed in

Washington. Eight months earlier the embassy in Tehran had been occupied by a mob. The Iranians had stayed for less than a day. There was no reason yet to think this would be different. So Carter decided not to interrupt his weekend.

As the President and the rest of America slept that night, another day had already begun in Iran. The hostages, bound hand and foot, blindfolded and isolated, could hear thousands of Iranians chanting in the streets. The crowd repeated two chants over and over: "Death to America" and "The embassy must be destroyed."

On Tuesday, it will be a year since the militant students seized the U.S. Embassy and took 63 Americans hostage. Another three diplomats at the Foreign Ministry were detained by the government. A presidential campaign has come and all but gone. A baseball season has come and gone. So has a Super Bowl championship. It has been a year of designer jeans, of Bo Derek, balloon bouquets, and custom-made roller skates.

For the families of the 52 hostages still held, the anguish of the uncertainty continues. It has been a teasing year, manipulated and dominated by the dark-browed, white-bearded, stone-eyed Khomeini.

It has been a year that has shown the American people that the United States, for all its sophistication, military might and advanced technology, can still be held powerless in the grip of cultures and leaders Americans know little about and make little effort to understand.

The hostages, depicted in cartoons as pawns so many times, have become precisely that. They will be released soon. They won't be released. Ups and downs. Hopes raised and hopes dashed.

For half a year, from Nov. 4 to April 24, when a brave but perhaps ill-conceived attempt to rescue the hostages foundered in an Iranian sandstorm, the hostage issue dominated the American news media.